# The Prairie West as promised land


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# "WE MUST FARM TO ENABLE US TO LIVE": THE PLAINS CREE AND AGRICULTURE TO 1900

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For Aboriginal people, especially those who entered into treaty negotiations, the Canadian West of the late nineteenth century was the "Promised Land." But the promises were not kept. In the treaties, they were promised that they would share the wealth to be created from their land and resources, but instead, the late nineteenth century began an era of profound dispossession and deprivation. The infinite riches described by boosters of the Canadian West to entice newcomers from all over the world were the resources and the land of First Nations, the peoples' sacred gifts from the Creator, or in Cree "*iyiniw saweyihtakosiwin*"[1] The "promised land" for immigrants, or "God's good gift to a teeming world," was the homeland of First Nations, where they were restricted to small and scattered reserves, their former mobility sharply curtailed.

The promotional literature used to entice immigrants by extolling the "countless thousands of leagues of territory,"[2] and the "wealth of commerce, agriculture, mining, lumbering, and fishing" to be found there, rarely mentioned Aboriginal people.[3] The bountiful riches were not for them, nor was there a place for them in the superior society to be created. There was no role for them but to disappear quietly. They were represented as invisible, non-threatening, and as a "dying race," as in other British settler colonies. To legitimize and justify possession and exploitation of their territory, their land was depicted as "tenantless and silent." Aboriginal

people were cast as unworthy custodians of the land, as they lacked the "energy, industry and capital" to develop the natural riches.

Yet at the treaty negotiations, Aboriginal people insisted that they must be part of the vision of a bountiful and prosperous West that was to be based on a new foundation of agriculture. They agreed to share their resources with newcomers, to live harmoniously and cooperatively with them, and in turn they sought the assistance they required to establish a new livelihood and economy based on agriculture. They sought, and in their view achieved, guarantees of economic self-sufficiency and independence in a living, evolving treaty relationship.[4] But as this article demonstrates, the land of promise did not materialize for them.

This article explores the topic of agriculture on Plains Cree reserves in the late nineteenth century, addressing the question of why farming failed to form the basis of a viable economy in these communities by 1900. The answer to this question is complex but has little to do with the prevailing explanation that Plains people had no inclination or ability to farm. The Plains Cree made sustained, determined efforts to establish an economy based on agriculture, but they faced many obstacles. There were environmental and technological challenges shared by all farmers at this time. Aboriginal farmers laboured under particular disadvantages because of their unique relationship with the federal government that ought to have assisted them in this enterprise but ultimately functioned to undermine their efforts. A "peasant" farming policy imposed from 1889 to 1896 was especially damaging to Plains Cree agriculture. It is also argued that non-Aboriginal people have persistently found it useful to insist that Aboriginal people and agriculture were incompatible, despite obvious evidence to the contrary. It was a convenient myth to sustain because it could be claimed that people who did not farm were not in need of much land and that economic underdevelopment of the reserves was due to the indifference and neglect, not of the government, but of Aboriginal people.

Early in September 1879, at Fort Carlton, North-West Territories, Plains Cree chiefs Ahtahkakoop, Mistawasis, and Kitowehaw, with five councillors, met with Edgar Dewdney, the recently appointed Commissioner of Indian Affairs. The chiefs were frustrated that promises of agricultural assistance, made to them three years earlier in Treaty No. 6, were "not carried out in their spirit."[5] They stated that they intended to live by the cultivation of the soil, as "the buffalo were our only dependence before the transfer of the country, and this and other wild animals

are disappearing, and we must farm to enable us to live." They insisted that government had not fulfilled its part of the treaty in assisting them to make a living by agriculture and that what had been given them made a mockery of the promises made in 1876. This was by no means the first effort of these chiefs to place their concerns before government officials, and there were similar expressions of dissatisfaction and disappointment throughout Manitoba and the North-West Territories.[6]

Such evidence of the strong commitment of the Plains Cree to agriculture seemed startling to me when I set out to explore why agriculture failed to provide a living for residents of arable Indian reserves in western Canada. The standard explanation, one firmly embedded in the non-Aboriginal prairie mentality, seemed compelling: that Aboriginal people of the Plains never had any inclination to settle down and farm despite concerted government efforts and assistance. I originally approached the topic with the argument in mind that agriculture was the wrong policy, for the wrong people, at the wrong time. Before I was too far along in my research, however, I found that there was little evidence of agriculture floundering because of the apathy and indifference of Aboriginal people, although it was certainly the case that this view was consistently maintained and promoted by the Department of Indian Affairs and later by many historians. Yet from the time of the treaties of the 1870s and well before, Aboriginal people were anxious to explore agriculture as an alternate economy when they began to realize the buffalo were failing them. It was not government negotiators but the Aboriginal spokesmen who insisted that terms be included in the treaties that would permit agricultural development. Aboriginal people of the western Plains were among the earliest and largest groups to attempt agriculture west of the Red River Settlement. Like most other "sodbusters," Aboriginal farmers were inclined to become commercial farmers specializing in grain. The fact that they did not had to do with government policy and intent, not with Aboriginal choice and inability.

My topic and approach are the product of a number of influences, including the work of "new" social historians who, beginning in the 1960s, argued that history should be not only the study of elites but of ordinary people as well, and of the day-to-day as well as the dramatic events. The new social history stressed that non-elites – ethnic minorities, women, the working class, and non-literate peoples – sought in various ways to transcend the limitations placed on them and were not hopeless victims of forces beyond their control but rather coped creatively with

changing conditions. While Arthur J. Ray, Sylvia Van Kirk, and John Milloy cast Native people in a central role as active participants in the history of the pre-1870 West, the same could not be said of the more modern era. In the dominant narrative histories of the West in the post-1870 era, Aboriginal people all but disappeared after they made treaties and settled on reserves. The story of the establishment of the rural core of the Prairie West was inevitably told from the point of view of the new arrivals, with little mention of the host society, and generally a record of positive achievement was stressed and the casualties of development were downplayed. Studies of late nineteenth-century imperialisms, which increasingly drew regions into a transcontinental network, provided context for understanding that what happened in western Canada was not unique, but was part of a global pattern of western expansion.

The Plains culture that evolved over centuries in western Canada seemed far removed from the sedentary lifestyle of farms, fields, and fences that began to alter forever the prairie landscape in the late nineteenth century. The Plains Cree, the northernmost people of the Great Plains of North America and one of the last Aboriginal groups to adopt Plains culture, developed a lifestyle that was well suited to the predominantly flat, treeless landscape and to the northern Plains climate of extremes and uncertainties. Particular habits of movement and dispersal suited the limited and specialized nature of the resources of the northern Plains. The Natives exploited the seasonal diversity of their environment by practising mobility. Plains people moved their settlements from habitat to habitat, depending on where they expected to find the greatest natural food supply. All aspects of life hinged on this mobility; their tepees, for example, were easily taken apart and moved, and their other property was kept to a strict minimum so that they would be unencumbered. As homesteaders were later to learn, basic necessities such as good soil, water, game, and fuel rarely came together in many Plains areas, and this combined with the great variability and uncertainty of the climate to make mobility central to the survival of the indigenous peoples of the Plains. Many of the earliest homesteaders on the Plains found that they could not stay put either, certainly not at first; they sought off-farm jobs, especially during the "start-up" years, or they were obliged to try several localities in their search for basic necessities. External inputs in the way of seed-grain relief, subsidies, or rations were often necessary as the resources of a fixed locality could not always sustain the inhabitants.

The buffalo was the foundation of the Plains economy, providing people not only with a crucial source of protein and vitamins but with many other necessities, including shelter, clothing, containers, and tools. Aboriginal life on the Plains followed a pattern of concentration and dispersal that to a great extend paralleled that of the buffalo. But Plains people were not solely hunters of buffalo. To rely on one staple resource alone was risky in the Plains environment, as there were periodic shortages of buffalo, and it was mainly the gathering and preserving work of women, based on their intimate understanding of the Plains environment, that varied the subsistence base and contributed to "risk reduction," a role the immigrant women to the Plains would also acquire. Mid-summer camp movements were determined not only by the buffalo but by considerations such as the ripeness and location of saskatoon berries, the prairie turnip, and other fruits and tubers. Many of the foodstuffs women gathered were dried, pounded, or otherwise preserved and stored for the scarce times of winter. Women fished, snared small game, caught prairie chickens and migratory birds, and gathered their eggs. A high degree of mobility was essential for people effectively to draw on the varied resources of the Plains.

Nineteenth-century European observers tended to see the Great Plains as a timeless land, as a place without history, its people unaffected by any outside forces and leaving no mark of their presence upon the land. Captain William Butler, who described the Plains in 1870 as a great ocean of grass, wrote that "This ocean has no past – time has been nought to it; and men have come and gone, leaving behind them no track, no vestige of their presence."[7] European observers saw Plains people as living at the mercy of natural forces and failed to appreciate the sophisticated adaptations to the environment and the many ways in which resources were altered, managed, and controlled. Methods such as the buffalo pound, like the Huron enclosures and Beothuk drivelines for capturing deer, have been described as a form of animal management. There is evidence that people of the northern Plains were concerned with keeping up buffalo herd numbers as they periodically burned the grasslands in the autumn to keep forage levels high. This burning increased yields, encouraged spring grass growth earlier, and induced buffalo into favoured areas of fresh, young grass. Fire was used to influence buffalo movement – to direct a herd to a kill site and to keep buffalo away from fur trade posts so that Europeans could not provision themselves. Fire was also used to protect valuable stands of timber.

Well before the treaties of the 1870s, some Plains people, particularly the Cree and Saulteaux, had begun to raise small crops and to keep cattle to smooth out the seasonal scarcities that were increasing as the buffalo receded westward. As the homesteaders were later to learn, however, especially those who attempted farming before the development of dry-land farming techniques and early-maturing varieties of grain, yields from cultivated plants were highly unpredictable, and a more flexible economy that combined agriculture with hunting and gathering was the most feasible until the disappearance of the buffalo in the late 1870s. Agriculture was a far more ancient and indigenous tradition on the Plains than the horse culture, which was a much more fleeting episode. Cree were acquainted with cultivated plant food and techniques of agriculture through several of their contacts, most notably the Mandan, Arikara, and Hidatsa, who maintained a flourishing agricultural economy on the upper Missouri. There is evidence of an agricultural village on the banks of the Red River near the present-day town of Lockport, Manitoba, that dates from between AD 1300 and AD 1500.[8] Blackfoot were found by the earliest of European fur traders to be growing tobacco.

Aboriginal people of the Plains were not as "passive" as the landscape; their world was not static and timeless. The archaeological and historical records suggest that on the Plains learning new ways took place regularly, that there was much adaptation and borrowing among people, and that changes occurred constantly. The Plains Cree, for example, had a history of making dramatic adjustments to new economic and ecological circumstances, modifying the ways in which they obtained their livelihood. With the establishment of fur trade posts on Hudson Bay after 1670, the Cree, along with their allies the Assiniboine, quickly seized the opportunity to function as middlemen to the trade. With the expansion of European fur trade posts inland in the late eighteenth century, the Cree took advantage of a new economic opportunity and worked as provisioners of buffalo meat to the trading companies. They showed themselves to be remarkably flexible in rapidly adjusting to the rewards and demands of different environments – the forest, parklands, and Plains. The branch that became the Plains Cree readily adopted many of the characteristics, techniques, and traits of Plains buffalo and horse culture. Aboriginal people such as the Cree were accustomed to making dramatic adjustments to new ecological and economic circumstances, and there is no inherent reason to believe that they could not have made adjustments to the new order of the post-1870 era by becoming full participants in

the agricultural economy. The fact that they did not was due not to their own choice; rather, there was a refusal to let them do so as they were denied access to the opportunities and resources that would have allowed them a more independent existence.

While Aboriginal people of the Plains required assistance and instruction to establish a farming economy, they had certain advantages that new arrivals did not enjoy. They had an intimate knowledge of the resources and climate of the West. They were much better informed on rainfall and frost patterns, on the availability of water and timber, and on soil varieties. They had experience with locusts, fires, and droughts. Aboriginal farmers might have had a better chance than many of the settlers from the humid East. Many of these never could accept the discomforts and conditions, and they departed, and even for those who remained acclimatization could take several years. Settlers from elsewhere might well have benefited from the knowledge Aboriginal people of the Plains had to offer. One settler in Saskatchewan, who had previously worked as a trader, consulted an Aboriginal friend named South Wind when he wanted to locate his homestead in the 1880s, and learned, for example, how to use fire to protect stands of timber and how to replenish the hay swamps. He later found local legislation regarding fire to be a "positive evil" and wrote that "our legislators should have had old South Wind at their Councils."[9] Accounts of such consultation are, however, very rare.

As early as the 1850s European travellers to the Plains reported that the Cree were concerned about the scarcity of buffalo, that many were anxious to try agriculture and wanted assistance in the ways of instruction and technology. They were well aware that the buffalo hunt was no longer going to sustain them. With the demise of the fur trade, agriculture appeared to be the only option. During the treaty negotiations of the 1870s, Plains people sought government aid to make the transition to an agricultural economy. In return for their offer of an opportunity for peaceful expansion, Aboriginal people asked that they be given the instruction and technology that would allow them to farm. Aboriginal spokesmen did not see any inherent conflict between their distinctive identity and active participation in an agricultural economy. Circumstances obliged them to cease living as their ancestors had done, but they did not therefore cease to be Aboriginals. Like the Natives of the older provinces of Canada, they were in favour of agriculture, resource development, and education that would assist them to survive,

but they did not, for example, intend to abandon their religious ceremonies and beliefs. Euro-Canadian observers consistently insisted on seeing Plains people as hunters, gatherers, and warriors incapable of adopting agriculture.

The main focus of this study is those people of the Treaty No. 4 district of southeastern Saskatchewan who settled on reserves in the Touchwood Hills, File Hills, and along the Qu'Appelle River. Most were Plains Cree, collectively known as the *mamihkiyiniwak*, the Downstream People, although Assiniboine, mixed Cree-Assiniboine (Young Dogs), and Saulteaux also settled here and were intermingled with Plains Cree bands. Although these people form the main focus, evidence was also drawn from the Treaty No. 6 district, settled primarily by Plains Cree known as the Upstream People. In the later 1870s, the earliest years of Indian reserve settlement in present-day Saskatchewan, farming proved nearly impossible despite concerted efforts. For some bands, farming was never to be successful because of the nature of the reserve site itself. Other bands received high-quality agricultural land that was later to excite the envy of other settlers. The earliest instructions to surveyors were that care should be taken to ensure reserve lands "should not interfere with the possible requirement of future settlement, or of land for railway purposes." At that time what was seen as the "fertile belt," and the proposed route for the Canadian Pacific Railway, ran northwest along the Assiniboine and North Saskatchewan rivers. Land further south was considered arid and unlikely ever to be wanted by settlers, so many reserves, such as those along the Qu'Appelle River, were surveyed there. But when the CPR route was changed in 1881 and rerouted through the south, many of these reserves were located near or on the railway route, in the midst of what was hoped would become the settlement belt and the heart of a prosperous agricultural economy.

Farming in the 1870s proved to be nearly impossible because the implements and livestock promised in the treaties were inadequate. Ten families, for example, were to share one plough. Bands varied in size, numbering between seventeen and fifty families, but regardless of size, each was offered only one yoke of oxen, one bull, and four cows. To earn a living from the soil, a yoke of oxen was required by every farming family. As one Plains Cree chief pointed out in 1879, it was perfectly ridiculous to expect them to get on with so few oxen, that every farmer in the Northwest, however poor, had his own yoke of oxen, that "We are new at the kind of work, but even white men cannot get on with so

few oxen."[10] In addition to the overall inadequacy of the agricultural assistance promised in the treaties, government officials were reluctant and tentative about distributing what was promised. The people prepared to farm expected their supply of implements, cattle, and seed immediately, but officials were determined to adhere strictly to the exact wording of the treaty, which stated that implements, cattle, and seed would be given to "any band … now actually cultivating the soil, or who shall hereafter settle on these reserves and commence to break up the land." Aboriginal people could not settle until the surveys were complete, and in some cases this took many years. They could not cultivate until they had implements to break the land, yet these were not to be distributed until they were settled and cultivating. Government officials shared the belief that the distribution even of those items promised in the treaties could "encourage idleness," and there was concern that the implements and cattle would not be used for the purposes for which they were intended.

There were also problems with the quality and distribution of seed grain. In the earliest years the seed arrived in a damaged state and was received in midsummer when the season was far too advanced for planting. Acres sometimes lay idle because there was no seed available, and more land might have been broken had there been seed to sow. It was also learned after a number of years that people cultivating the reserves had to be supplied with some provisions in the spring during ploughing and sowing. The people of Treaty No. 6 had successfully bargained for this during their negotiations, but no such promise had been made to the people of Treaty No. 4. Although David Laird, Lieutenant-Governor and Indian superintendent for the North-West Superintendency, recommended in 1877 that some provisions be distributed in the spring to Treaty No. 4 bands, this request was struck from the estimates in Ottawa. It proved impossible for more than a few to remain on their reserves and cultivate as the others were obliged to hunt and gather provisions for the group to survive. Once seeding was finished, and sometimes even before, many residents of the reserves were out on the Plains, leaving behind only a few to tend the crops.

Aboriginal farmers were hampered in their earliest efforts by the kind of ploughs they were issued. By the late 1870s, Manitoba farmers had learned that American ploughs, especially the John Deere, with its chilled-steel mouldboard, were far superior for western conditions than the Ontario models. The Indian Department, however, continued until 1882 to purchase only Canadian-manufactured ploughs, which proved

to be unsatisfactory. There were problems keeping in good repair the implements and wagons that were distributed, as they frequently broke down, crippling operations. Wooden parts were sometimes replaced by the farmer, but the breakage of metal parts was much more serious, as reserve farmers did not have access to blacksmiths, who were also required to point, or sharpen, plough-shares. Other equipment and livestock supplied by contractors under the terms of the treaties were clearly inferior, and Aboriginal people simply refused to accept some of it. An 1878 commission of investigation found Winnipeg Indian commissioner J.A.N. Provencher guilty of fraud in the awarding of contracts and it was discovered, among other things, that it was standard practice to furnish the Indian Department with "the most inferior articles."[11] In 1879 one observer described the carts and wagons supplied to but refused by Treaty No. 6 people near Fort Carlton as "the poorest description of Red River carts, which have been used by freighters up to this point, and are really unfit for further use; while the wagons are literally falling to pieces." The axes, "miserably small," were also refused.[12]

Perhaps the most scandalous example of corruption was in the cattle sent to a great many reserves in the late 1870s. They received wild Montana cattle, which were unaccustomed to work and could not be hitched to the plough. The milk cows given out were of the same description. The Fort Carlton bands were astounded when these cattle were brought to them from Montana, when tame cattle could have been purchased at Prince Albert or Red River. Most of them died over the first winter of 1878–79. Some choked themselves when tied in stables; others could not be fed because they did not take to the food. As one Plains Cree chief stated: "We know why these Montana cattle were given us; because they were cheaper, and the Government, thinking us a simple people, thought we would take them."[13] He was correct. It became clear during the 1878 investigation that individuals in Winnipeg had profited by purchasing these creatures from Montana at about half the rate that they actually charged the Indian Department.

Aboriginal farmers laboured under other disadvantages as well. In these earliest years there were no grist mills located near reserves, and the wheat they raised was of no use to them without milling facilities. With the disappearance of the buffalo, the main source for all their apparel also vanished. They lacked clothing and footwear, which one official described as the greatest drawback to their work. To cover their feet

they cut up old leather lodges, but these too rapidly diminished. Often hungry, weak, and ill, people could not work no matter how willing.

There was little progress in agriculture in the years immediately following the treaties of the 1870s. Early on, government officials insisted that this had to do with the indifference and apathy of Aboriginal people, who willfully rejected an agricultural way of life and inflexibly and stubbornly insisted on pursuing hunting and gathering. Through idleness they were creating their own problems. An explanation that belittled and deprecated the abilities of Aboriginal farmers absolved the government of any responsibility in the matter, and it was to be the favoured explanation of department officials well into the twentieth century. During these initial years of government parsimony, indifference, and outright corruption, an opportunity was lost. Many of those who wished to farm found it impossible and became disheartened and discouraged. Had the government shown a genuine interest, some steps towards the creation of an agricultural economy might have been taken during the years before 1878–79, when the food crisis, brought on by the total disappearance of the buffalo, became severe. There was much distress, suffering, and death throughout the Northwest by 1878, although reports of starvation were systematically denied by government officials and the western press, as such news could damage the reputation of the region as a prospective home for thousands of immigrants. Once again, Aboriginal people were portrayed as chronic complainers with imaginary grievances, and they were blamed for having "not made the usual effort to help themselves."[14]

The other legacy of the years immediately following the treaties was the sense of betrayal felt by Aboriginal people who had expected government assistance in the difficult transition to an agricultural economy. As Chief Ahtahkakoop stated in 1879: "On the transfer of the country we were told that the Queen would do us all the good in the world, and that the Indians would see her bounty. With this message came presents of tobacco, and I took it at once; and I pray now that the bounty then promised may be extended to us." Three years after the treaty, the chief was convinced that the "policy of the Government has been directed to its own advantage, and the Indians have not been considered so much." These chiefs had made several representations to government authorities, "but they were as if they were thrown into water."[15]

Chief Pasquah, from the Pasquah Reserve in southeastern Saskatchewan, had presented Joseph Cauchon, Lieutenant-Governor of

Manitoba, with similar grievances and concerns a year earlier.[16] His people, though willing to farm and diversify their subsistence base, had no cattle to break and work the land, no seed to sow, and no provisions to sustain them while at work. Aboriginal people had reason to feel that they had been deceived and led along a path that ended in betrayal, that their treatment constituted a breach of faith. They were getting the clear impression that the treaties were made simply as a means of getting peaceable possession of the country without any regard to their welfare. As Aboriginal spokesmen grasped every opportunity to implore the government to assist them to make a living by agriculture, department officials increasingly reacted by blaming the Natives for their misfortunes and portraying them as troublemakers and chronic complainers, incapable of telling the truth.

In the wake of alarming reports from the Northwest of destitution and starvation, an ambitious plan to both feed and instruct Aboriginal people in farming was hastily contrived in Ottawa in the fall and winter of 1878–79. A squad of farm instructors, mainly from Ontario, was sent west in the summer of 1879. They were to establish "home farms" at fifteen sites in the Northwest: six in the Treaty No. 4 district and nine in the Treaty No. 6 district. At these farms, located on or near the reserves, the instructors were to raise large quantities of provisions to support not only themselves, their families, and employees but also the neighbouring Aboriginal population. Their farms were to serve as "model farms" for Aboriginal observers, and in addition the instructors were to visit the reserve farmers from time to time to assist them in breaking, seeding, and harvesting and in building their houses, barns, and root houses. At two "supply farms" in the Treaty No. 7 district, large quantities of produce were to be raised, but the farmers at these sites were not given the additional responsibility of instructing Aboriginal farmers.

The home farm plan was hastily and poorly conceived in Ottawa by people without any knowledge of Aboriginal people or of the region's soil and climate. The men chosen as instructors were unfamiliar with conditions of life in the West and knew nothing about Aboriginal people. They had to be provided with both guides and interpreters. As one Aboriginal spokesman stated, it only made sense that a farm instructor be a man "from the country, who understands the language, and with whom I could speak face to face, without an interpreter."[17] The official rationale for not choosing local people was that "strangers" were likely to carry out their duties more efficiently, would not have their

favourites, and would treat all fairly and alike. It is also clear, however, that the position of farm instructor was a patronage appointment, and all were chosen by Sir John A. Macdonald, the Canadian prime minister, from a list furnished by Laurence Vankoughnet, deputy superintendent-general of Indian Affairs. In addition, the tasks assigned the instructors were beyond the resources and capabilities of any individual, however well acquainted he might be with conditions in the Northwest. It soon proved that the instructors had great difficulty establishing even the most modest farms. The government found itself responsible for the support of instructors, their families, and employees, who ran farms with such dismal returns that they contributed almost nothing to the expense of running them. It was also soon discovered that the farmers simply could not attend both to their own farms and to assisting on reserve farms. The instructors seldom visited the reserves and lacked even basic knowledge about the people they were to instruct. The program turned out to be an administrative nightmare. Difficulties with personnel arose early, and the program was characterized by resignations and dismissals. The instructors were angered by government decisions to charge them for the board of themselves and family, and also to charge them for food they consumed that they had raised themselves.

Beset with all of these difficulties, the home farm program floundered. In the House of Commons, government critics hammered away at the plan. They claimed that the instructors were incompetent carpetbaggers, but the central criticism was that there should be no such expenditure on the Aboriginal people of the Northwest, as this was encouraging idleness when they should be made to rely solely on their own resources. One member of Parliament argued that the program was an enormous waste of money because efforts to "civilize Indians" were inevitably doomed to failure.[18] Government defenders of the program argued that the essential problem lay with Aboriginal people, who were "idlers by nature and uncivilized." In the opinion of Prime Minister Macdonald, they were not suited to agriculture, as they "have not the ox-like quality of the Anglo-Saxon; they will not put their neck to the yoke."[19]

There were many vocal critics of the home farm program in the Northwest as well. Non-Aboriginal residents viewed the program as unfair because too much was being done to equip Aboriginal people to farm, more than was available to the true "homesteaders," upon whom it was felt the prosperity of the region depended. The home farm program ingrained the idea that Aboriginal farmers were being lavishly provided

with farm equipment and other assistance that was "conducive to the destruction of self-reliance, and calculated to give them a false impression of what the Government owed them." In the wake of the food crisis in the Northwest, the government had begun to provide modest rations to reserve residents. Indeed, some of the farm instructors found much of their time taken up issuing relief in the form of "musty and rusty" salt pork in exchange for assigned work. Many non-Native residents were critical of the distribution of rations, which they saw as a reward for idleness and as unfair because it gave Aboriginal farmers an advantage over other struggling farmers.

The home farm program had a very brief life in its original form. By 1884 the department had officially retired the policy, which had already undergone much modification. Farm instructors remained and their numbers increased, but their own farms were to consist of no more than a few acres and they were to concentrate on instruction. New recruits were no longer brought from Ontario at great expense but were men from the Northwest.

All who attempted farming on the Plains in the 1880s experienced frustration and failure. Crops during this decade were damaged year after year by drought and early frosts. Prairie fires became a serious hazard, consuming haystacks as well as houses, stables, and fences, and hampering the abilities of farmers not only to winter cattle but to carry out the whole cycle of arming operations. There was a high rate of homestead cancellation, and many of the community experiments of ethnic, religious, working-class, and aristocratic groups did not survive the decade.

A major difference between the Aboriginal farmer and his neighbours was that, while newcomers had the option to leave and try their luck elsewhere, reserve residents had little choice but to persevere, as under the *Indian Act* they were excluded from taking homesteads. Aboriginal farmers could not obtain loans because they were not regarded as the actual owners of any property, however extensive and valuable their improvements might be, and they had difficulty obtaining credit from merchants. Because of many of the technicalities and prohibitions of the *Indian Act*, Natives were prevented from doing business or transacting even the most ordinary daily affair. They were deprived of the right to do what they chose with nearly everything they acquired by their own personal industry. People who came under the *Indian Act* were prevented by a permit system from selling, exchanging, bartering, or giving away any produce grown on their reserves without the permission of department

officials. A pass system, imposed initially during the 1885 Rebellion but continued well into the twentieth century, controlled and confined the movements of people off their reserves. Those who wished to leave the reserve were obliged to acquire a pass from the farm instructor or Indian agent declaring the length of and reason for absence. The most recent arrivals to the country had far more rights, privileges, and freedom than the original inhabitants.

Despite these restrictions and the drought, frost, and prairie fires of these years, reserve farmers in some localities made significant advances in the 1880s. Several of the problems that had hampered reserve farming in the past had to some extent been ameliorated. Through a "cattle on loan" policy, for example, many bands had considerably increased their numbers of work oxen, cows, steers, heifers, and bulls. Under this system, the department "loaned" a cow to an individual who was to raise a heifer, either of which had to be returned to the Indian agent. The animal became the property of the individual, although the agent's permission was required to sell or slaughter. Reserve farmers also had increased access to grist mills in the 1880s as the department initiated a program of granting bonuses to individuals who would establish mills in the Northwest. Recipients of the bonus were obliged to charge Aboriginal customers a little less than ordinary customers for a ten-year period. The department also displayed greater concern to supply the services of blacksmiths, which bolstered agricultural operations.

Reserve farmers began to acquire some of the up-to-date machinery necessary to facilitate their operations. Mowers and rakes were the most common purchases. Some reserves were fortunate in their abundant hay supplies, and a number of bands sold hay on contract to other reserves, to settlers, and to the North-West Mounted Police. Selling hay was one of the very few opportunities for outside employment available to reserve residents. These machines were purchased with their own earnings or through pooled annuities. They were not purchased for them by the department. Agents and farm instructors in the 1880s felt that access to mowers and rakes was essential for all bands, not only those that sold hay. As stock increased on the reserves, mowers and rakes were necessary to provide enough hay. Reapers and self-binders were also acquired during this period. The self-binder lessened the danger of being caught by frost during a protracted harvest and it also reduced the waste experienced in binding with short straw. Such machinery permitted farmers to cultivate larger areas. By the late 1880s on some reserves in the districts

of Treaty No. 4 and Treaty No. 6, farmers were beginning to see some significant results of their labour, and they had produce that they wished to sell: predominantly cattle, grain, and hay.

Like other prairie women of this period, Aboriginal women helped in the fields during peak seasons such as haying and harvest, but otherwise the business of grain farming was predominantly a male activity. Women continued to harvest wild resources such as berries, wild rhubarb, prairie turnip, and birch sap, and they hunted rabbits, gophers, and ducks. Because of increased settlement, the pass system, and calls for the restriction of Aboriginal hunting rights, these opportunities became increasingly constricted. Aboriginal women were eager to learn new skills and to adopt new technology. By the late 1880s the wives of many farm instructors acquired the title of "instructress" and they, as well as the wives of missionaries, taught skills such as milking, butter-making, bread-making, and knitting. Women adapted readily to these activities, but a chronic shortage of raw materials made it difficult to apply what they had learned. While the women knew how to make loaf bread, for example, they did not have the proper ovens, yeast, or baking tins, so they continued to make bannock, despite government attempts to abolish it from the diet as it required more flour than loaf bread. They seldom had yarn with which to knit. There were no buttons for the dresses the women made. They were often short of milk pans, although they made their own using birchbark. One instructress reported in 1891 that the greatest drawback was "their extreme poverty, their lack of almost every article of domestic comfort in their houses, and no material to work upon."[20] They lacked basic necessities such as soap, towels, wash basins, and wash pails, and had no means with which to acquire these.

The log dwelling on reserves in this era and well into the twentieth century were invariably described as "huts" or "shacks" that were one storey and one room. The roofs were constructed with logs or poles over which rows of straw or grass were laid. They were chinked inside and out with a mixture of mud and hay and had clay stoves but no flooring, and tanned hide was used for window covering. It was impossible to apply lessons of "housewifery" in such shacks. In publications of the Department of Indian Affairs, however, Aboriginal women were often depicted as poor housekeepers who willfully ignored instruction in modern methods. They were blamed for the poor living and health conditions on the reserves. Explanations that stressed the incapacity of Aboriginal women to change,

like those that disparaged the farming abilities of the men, absolved the government of any responsibility for the poverty of the reserves.

As Aboriginal farmers acquired the technology required by western conditions and as they began to increase their acreages and their herds, they also began to pose a threat as competitors in the marketplace. By the late 1880s, farmers in parts of the Northwest were complaining loudly about "unfair" competition from Aboriginal people. It was widely believed that government assistance gave Aboriginal farmers an unfair advantage. Non-Aboriginal settlers had the misconception that reserve farmers were lavishly provided with livestock, equipment, government labour, and rations, and did not have to worry about the price at which their products were sold. There was absolutely no appreciation of the disadvantages they laboured under, or of how government regulation and Canadian laws acted to stymie their efforts. Editorials in the *Fort Macleod Gazette* regularly lamented "Indian competition," which was injuring the "true" settlers of the country. If the Siksika (Blackfoot), Kainai (Blood), Pikuni (Peigan), and Tsuu T'ina (Sarcee) were "cut loose" from the treaty, support could be given to their industries, according to the *Gazette*, but it was "pretty hard to ask the people of the country to contribute toward the support of a lot of idle paupers, and then allow them to use this very support for the purpose of taking the bread out of the settler's month [*sic*]."[21]

It was argued in the *Gazette* throughout the 1880s and 1890s that Aboriginal people should not be permitted to compete with the settlers in the sale of hay, potatoes, or grain. Any evidence that they were successful in securing contracts was used as proof that they had underbid non-Natives. There was no consideration that their product might be superior, as was certainly the case with the hay purchased by the North-West Mounted Police, who often noted in their reports that the best hay was bought from reserve farmers.[22] In a letter to the editor in July 1895, one local resident claimed that "it is altogether unfair to allow these Indians to enter into competition with white men who, even with hard work, find it difficult to make both ends meet and provide for their families." Evidence of unfair competition was used by the editors of the *Gazette* to bolster their larger campaign of the later 1880s to have Aboriginal people moved to one big reserve, an "Indian territory" out of the way of the Euro-Canadian settlements. It was argued that Indian policy had been a failure as Aboriginal people "had not made a single step toward becoming self-supporting."[23] There was apparently no recognition

of the fact that it was impossible to become self-supporting to any degree unless they were allowed to sell their products.

Concerns about unfair "Indian competition" were echoed in other parts of the Northwest as well. The residents of Battleford and district were particularly strident in their objections to the competition of the Plains Cree in the grain, hay, and wood markets. Here, as well as in the district of southern Alberta, there was concern that reserve residents not become successful stockraisers as the supply of cattle to the Indian Department for rations was a vital source of revenue for many settlers. On October 13, 1888, the editor of the *Saskatchewan Herald* of Battleford denounced any plan to "set the Indians up as cattle breeders, encouraging them to supply the beef that is now put in by white contractors."

Here, as in other districts, Aboriginal farmers were in competition with new settlers for hay land. Because of the predominantly dry years of the 1880s, hay was very scarce some seasons. Off-reserve areas where reserve farmers had customarily cut hay became the subject of heated disputes. Non-Aboriginal residents of the Battleford district successfully petitioned the minister of the interior in 1889 to limit the hay land available to Aboriginal farmers off the reserves, despite the fact that the Battleford agent had warned that there would be no alternative but to decrease stock on the reserves. Many influential people in the West had a direct interest in the continuation of rations and in seeing that Aboriginal people were not self-supporting. Large operations like the W. F. Cochrane Ranch in southern Alberta found a sizable market for their beef on the neighbouring reserves. In his correspondence to department officials, Cochrane naturally objected to any reduction in rations, arguing that this meant that their lives, as well as their property and cattle operation, would be in danger.[24]

In 1889, Hayter Reed, Commissioner of Indian Affairs in Regina, announced that a new "approved system of farming" was to be applied to Indian reserves in western Canada. Reserve farmers were to reduce their area under cultivation to a single acre of wheat and a garden of roots and vegetables. Along with a cow or two, this would sufficiently provide for a farmer and his family. They were to use rudimentary implements alone: to broadcast seed by hand, harvest with scythes, bind by hand with straw, thresh with flails, and grind their grain with hand mills. They were to manufacture at home any items they required, such as harrows, hayforks, carts, and yokes. This policy complemented government intentions to subdivide the reserves into small holdings of forty acres

each. Publicly, the subdivision of the reserves and the peasant farming policy were justified as an approach intended to render reserve residents self-supporting. Individual tenure, it was claimed, would implant a spirit of self-reliance and individualism, thus eroding "tribalism." Hayter Reed argued that the use of labour-saving machinery might be necessary and suitable for settlers, but Indians first had to experience farming with crude and simple implements. To do otherwise defied immutable laws of evolution and would be an "unnatural leap." In Reed's view, Aboriginal people had not reached the stage at which they were in a position to compete with white settlers.[25] Another argument forwarded against the use of labour-saving machinery was that rudimentary implements afforded useful employment for all.

Clearly, however, there were other reasons for the peasant farming formula and for allotment in severalty, reasons that were understood and appreciated by non-Aboriginal settlers. The *Saskatchewan Herald* applauded the policy for the Aboriginal farmer:

> Thrown thus on himself and left to work his farm without the aid of expensive machinery, he will content himself with raising just what he needs himself, and thus, while meeting the Government's intention of becoming self-sustaining, they at the same time would come into competition with the white settler only to the extent of their own labour, and thus remove all grounds for the complaint being made in some quarters against Government aided Indians entering into competition with white settlers.[26]

This was a policy of deliberate arrested development. The allotment of land in severalty was viewed by officials, as well as by Prime Minister Macdonald himself, as a means of defining surplus land that might be sold.[27] Severalty would confine people within circumscribed boundaries, and their "surplus" land could be fined and sold. Arrested development was a certain means of ensuring that much reserve land would appear to be vacant and unused.

Despite the protests of Aboriginal farmers, Indian agents, farm instructors, and inspectors of the agencies, the peasant farming policy was implemented on Plains reserves beginning in 1889. Officials were not to authorize the purchase, hire, or use of any machinery. Even if people had purchased machinery before the policy was adopted, they were still to use hand implements. Farmers with larger holdings were to use the labour of others rather than revert to the use of machinery, or

they were to restrict their acreages to what they could handle with hand implements alone. Officials in the field were dismayed by the policy that robbed the farmers of any potential source of revenue. They argued that the seasons in the Northwest were simply too short for the use of hand implements, which meant a loss in yield at harvest time and resulted in a much reduced supply of hay. Agent W. S. Grant of the Assiniboine Reserve protested that "the seasons in this country are too short to harvest any quantity of grain, without much waste, with only old fashioned, and hand implements to do the work with." In his view the amount of grain lost in his agency through harvesting with hand implements would be of sufficient quantity to pay for a binder in two years.[28]

Aboriginal farmers were profoundly discouraged by the new rules. It was widely reported that many refused to work with the hand implements and gave up farming altogether. One farmer from Moose Mountain declared he would let his grain stand and never plough another acre, while another gave up his oxen, his wheat, and the reserve.[29] Other aspects of the program, such as the home manufactures idea, were unrealistic and unworkable. Homemade wooden forks, for example, were simply not strong enough for loading hay, grain, or manure. They were to make their own lanterns, but agents protested that people could not look after their cattle at night without proper lanterns. At headquarters in Ottawa, it proved impossible even to acquire some of the old-fashioned implements, such as hand mills, destined for the Aboriginal farmers. But Reed was not sympathetic to or moved by the objections and complaints, and he refused to give in to the "whims of farmers and Indians." He advised that losing some of the crop or growing less grain was preferable to the use of machinery. If grain was being lost, the solution was for farmers to confine their acreage to what they could handle. Department employees were not to convene or be present at meetings with Aboriginal farmers, as this would give "an exaggerated importance" to their request for machinery. They risked dismissal if they refused to comply with peasant farming policy.

The policy of deliberate discouragement of reserve agriculture worked well. By the mid-1890s, per capita acreage under cultivation had fallen to about half of the 1889 level and many serious farmers had given up farming altogether. In 1899 a resident of Prince Albert, William Miller Sr., wrote to the minister of the interior that in passing through the Duck Lake and Carlton reserves, he noted "no less than five fields [which can] be seen from the trail now without a bushel of grain sown in

them … that previously used to be an example to the settlers around."[30] Peasant farming, severalty, and measures such as the permit system combined to undermine and atrophy agricultural development on reserves. The Canadian government acted not to promote the agriculture of the indigenous population but to provide an optimum environment for the immigrant settler. Whatever Canada did for its "wards" was subordinate to the interests of the non-Aboriginal population. Government policy was determined by the need to maintain the viability of the immigrant community.

Aboriginal people protested policies that affected them adversely, as they had from the 1870s. They raised objections to government officials, petitioned the House of Commons, sent letters to newspapers, and visited Ottawa. But the outlets for protest were increasingly restricted. Grievances related to instructors and agents rarely went further. Agency inspectors were, as mentioned, not allowed to hold audiences with reserve residents. The published reports of agents and inspectors were to divulge only that "which it was desired the public should believe."[31] Visiting officials such as the governor-general, who were usually accompanied by journalists, were taken only to select agencies that would leave the best impression. Department officials, particularly those in the central office, shared the view that Aboriginal people were chronic complainers not to be believed and a people who would go to extraordinary lengths to avoid diligent work.

Hayter Reed and the peasant farming formula were disposed of the year after Wilfrid Laurier and the Liberals came to power in 1896, but the damaging legacy of the policy was to be felt for years to come. Laurier was fortunate in coming to power just at a time when a constellation of factors, including rising world wheat prices, increased rainfall on the prairies, innovations in dry-land farming techniques, and massive immigration allowed a wheat economy to prosper in western Canada. Aboriginal farmers, however, had little place in this new age of prosperity. By the turn of the century, agriculture did not form the basis of a stable reserve economy, and after that date the likelihood faded even further as the new administrators of Indian Affairs promoted land surrenders that further limited the agricultural capacity of reserves. The fact that there was "vacant" and "idle" land on many reserves, to a great extent the result of the peasant farming years, conveniently played into the hands of those who argued that Aboriginal people had land far in excess of their needs and capabilities. Government policy was that it

was in the best interests of all concerned to encourage reserve residents to divest themselves of land they held "beyond their possible requirements" and the policy received widespread support in the western press and from farmers and townspeople. Residents of towns near Indian reserves regularly submitted petitions claiming that these tracts retarded the development and progress of their districts. Such pressure resulted in the alienation of many thousands of acres of reserve land, often the best land, in the years shortly after the turn of the century. The economic viability of reserve communities was deliberately eroded by the dominant society, mainly through government policies.

In the post-treaty era to 1900, the Plains Cree were resolved to establish a new economy based on agriculture. They faced many impediments and frustrations in these efforts. Implements and livestock promised under treaty were inadequate, and government officials proved reluctant to distribute these. These officials insisted that people were to be settled on their reserves *and cultivating* in advance of their receiving the implements and cattle promised to them, although that which had been promised was necessary for cultivation. Seed grain arrived too late or in a damaged state and wild Montana cattle were distributed instead of domestic oxen. Workers on reserves lacked proper clothing and footwear, and they were weak because of hunger and illness. Many reserves were distant from markets and transportation, and there were no milling facilities in the earliest years of reserve life.

The government attempted to address some of these problems and the food crisis in the Northwest through a "home farm" policy that was hastily devised and implemented in 1879. The plan was to have farm instructors establish model farms, raise large quantities of food for rations, and teach agriculture. It was a poorly conceived policy as these tasks were beyond the capabilities of the men appointed, most of whom had no acquaintance with Aboriginal people or with conditions in the Northwest. This policy was shelved by 1884, but farm instructors remained on many reserves, indicating an important measure of government commitment to the establishment of farming at that time, and some advances in agriculture were made in the mid- to late 1880s. But environmental conditions were grim for all farmers at that time. There were early frosts, and drought and prairie fires caused enormous damage. Aboriginal farmers laboured under particular disadvantages. Because of the prohibitions of the *Indian Act*, they could not expand their land base

or try their luck elsewhere by taking out homesteads, and they could not take out loans or transact their own business affairs.

Despite all of the challenges of the 1880s, Plains Cree farmers in some localities made significant advances, raising a surplus for sale and acquiring necessary machinery by the end of that decade. Non-Aboriginal residents of the West expressed concern about this success and the threat of competition in the limited markets. In 1889, in response to these concerns, the government introduced a "peasant" farming policy. Reserve farmers were to cultivate no more than an acre or two using only rudimentary hand implements. The central argument of this article is that this policy, combined with the other disadvantages and conditions that beset Plains Cree farmers, impaired the establishment of a viable economy.

**NOTES**

1 Harold Cardinal and Walter Hildebrandt, *Treaty Elders of Saskatchewan: Our Dream Is That Our Peoples Will One Day Be Clearly Recognized as Nations* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2000), 10.

2 Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (London: Cassell, 1999): 1–3.

3 See, for example, Anonymous, *The New West: Extending from the Great Lakes Across Plain and Mountain to the Golden Shores of the Pacific* (Winnipeg: Canadian Historical Publishing Co., 1888), preface, n.p. Although not mentioned in this passage, Aboriginal people are there between the lines, or at least a jumble of ideas about them are there: "… although the strides in the march of progress, keeping pace with the advancement of nineteenth century civilization, have been marvelously rapid in this fair land, there are countless thousands of leagues of territory on which the foot of man has never trod, lying tenantless and silent, only awaiting the advent of the Anglo-Saxon race to be transformed into a prosperous and thriving country. The wealth of commerce, agriculture, mining, lumbering and fishing, latently exists in untold measure. The virgin soil, the primeval forest and the teeming lakes and rivers all possess undeveloped riches. Man alone is apparently the missing quantity, and his energy, industry and capital are the required elements in developing this young, but sturdy Dominion into the great Britain of the West."

4 Cardinal and Hildebrandt, *Treaty Elders of Saskatchewan*, 61.

5 Anonymous, *Chronicles by the Way: A Series of Letters Addressed to the Montreal Gazette Descriptive of a Trip Through Manitoba and the North-West* (Montreal: Montreal Gazette, 1879), 26.

6 "North-West Territories" was the form used until 1912, when it became the present "Northwest Territories."

7 William F. Butler, *The Great Lone Land* [1872] (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1968), 317–18.

8 Neal Putt, *Place Where the Spirit Lives: Stories from the Archaeology and History of Manitoba* (Winnipeg: Pemmican, 1991), 64.

9 Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Saskatchewan Homesteading Experiences, MG 30 C16, Vol. 3, 790.

10 Anon., *Chronicles by the Way*, 28.
11 E. Brian Titley, "Unsteady Debut: J.-A.-N. Provencher and the Beginnings of Indian Administration in Manitoba," *Prairie Forum* 22, no. 1, 1997: 21–46.
12 Anon., *Chronicles by the Way*, 29.
13 Ibid., 28.
14 *Saskatchewan Herald* (Battleford), April 26, 1879.
15 Ibid.
16 LAC, RG10, Vol. 3665, file 10094, Interpreter to Joseph Cauchon, June 1, 1878.
17 Ibid.
18 *House of Commons Debates*, 1884, 2: 1105 (Philipe Casgrain).
19 Ibid., 1107 (John A. Macdonald).
20 LAC, RG 10, Vol. 3845, File 73406-7, T. P. Wadsworth to Hayter Reed, February 17, 1891.
21 *Macleod Gazette*, December 7, 1886.
22 Annual Report of Commissioner L. W. Herchmer for 1889, in *The New West*: *Being the Official Reports to Parliament of the Activities of the Royal* [*sic*] *North-West Mounted Police Force from 1888–89* (Toronto: Coles, 1973), 6.
23 *Macleod Gazette*, December 7, 1886.
24 LAC, Hayter Reed Papers, W. F. Cochrane to L. Vankoughnet, September 6, 1893, file W. F. Cochrane.
25 LAC, RG 10, vol. 3964, File 148285, Hayter Reed to A. Forget, August 24, 1896.
26 *Saskatchewan Herald*, August 20, 1887.
27 Kenneth J. Tyler, "A Tax-Eating Proposition: The History of the Passpasschase Indian Reserve," Master's thesis, University of Alberta, 1979, 114.
28 LAC, RG 10, Vol. 3964, File 148285, W. S. Grant to Reed, October 1, 1896.
29 Ibid., J. J. Campbell to Reed, Oct. 8, 1896, and Grant to Reed, October 1, 1896.
30 LAC, RG 10, Vol. 3993, File 187812, William Miller Sr. to the Minister of the Interior, July 21, 1899.
31 LAC, RG 10, Deputy-Superintendent letterbooks, Vol. 1115, Reed to J. Wilson, August 3, 1894.